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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ AND ROSALES MOBILIZE HUGE CROWDS IN FINAL
MAJOR CAMPAIGN RALLIES

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Opposition candidate Manuel Rosales and President Chavez both held their last major campaign rallies in Caracas November 25 and 26, respectively. Rosales delivered a milestone stump speech November 25 to hundreds of thousands of supporters, easily his biggest campaign rally to date. The next day, Chavez delivered a fiery get-out-the-vote speech, riddled with anti-American rhetoric, to an even larger crowd. Anticipating victory, Chavez dedicated this election to Fidel Castro. While both campaigns made surprisingly strong shows of strength in their final major campaign rallies, the events also reflected the Chavez government's distinct electoral advantages. The extremely well organized, well-funded Chavez rally was essentially a national event with supporters bused in from all over Venezuela. The no-frills Rosales rally was largely a Caracas event, in part because the government obstructed the arrival of Rosales supporters to the capital. End Summary.

The "Mother of All Avalanches"

¶2. (SBU) Large crowds of Rosales supporters gathered at four different rallying points early on November 25 and marched on the Francisco Fajardo highway toward the Las Mercedes neighborhood in western Caracas. The government's decision to clean tunnels, conduct road work, and do seat-belt checks obstructed traffic on major arteries into Caracas the same morning, preventing some Rosales supporters from reaching the march on time. Nevertheless, by the time Rosales began to speak at 12:55 p.m., hundreds of thousands of supporters, mostly from Caracas, filled the highway and overflowed into parallel streets. This was Rosales' biggest campaign rally to date, and the crowd was on par, if not bigger, than the opposition rallies associated with the 2004 presidential recall referendum. It also attracted participants from a wide range of socio-economic groups.

¶3. (C) Rosales had billed the November 25 rally the "Three-Color Avalanche," and most marchers either carried the yellow, blue, and red Venezuelan flag or wore Venezuela's national colors. At the same time, a large number of marchers also wore their party's colors or carried party banners. Poloffs observed that the Christian Democrats

(COPEI), Primero Justicia (PJ), and surprisingly, William Ojeda's One People Party ("Un Solo Pueblo") appeared well represented. Despite Accion Democratica's (AD) declared abstentionist policy, there were also a large number of AD marchers carrying their party's symbol. Vice Presidential Candidate Julio Borges, surrounded by a small samba band, marched in the middle of the crowd. He and Teodoro Petkoff joined Rosales on stage at the end of Rosales' speech. The mood of the crowd was decidedly festive and participants seemed genuinely surprised -- and pleased -- by the massive turn-out.

¶4. (SBU) While not widely known as a strong orator, Rosales delivered a forceful 70-minute stump speech that both summarized his proposed political program and sharply criticized Chavez' radicalism. Rosales, flanked by his family, told the large crowd that they represented "the real poll," an apparent dismissal of recent polls showing Rosales trailing Chavez by as much as 20 percent. Rosales promised to make his first priority the creation of his proposed "Mi Negra" debit card for direct redistribution of government oil revenues. Asserting that 90,000 Venezuelans had been murdered in the last eight years, Rosales promised to put more and better trained police on the streets and to reform the judicial system.

¶5. (SBU) Rosales also warned that Chavez' plans to implement "Socialism in the 21st Century" would mean the enrichment of a few while the vast majority of Venezuelans would be made dependent on the government "like beggars." He repeatedly attacked Chavez' laxly administered foreign give-away programs, especially to Cuba, and predicted that a Chavez government would send Venezuelan soldiers to fight in wars "they neither understand or support." Rosales also made a strong get-out-the-vote pitch and once again urged his supporters not to be afraid of the voter identification fingerprinting (digital scanning) machines. He also urged his supporters to verify the printed receipts of their

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electronic ballots.

The Anti-American "Red Tide"

¶6. (C) Chavez supporters gathered at four different locations in central Caracas early on November 26. Contrary to the obstacles the government put up for the Rosales rally, the government facilitated the arrival of participants by lifting tolls and making the Metro free near the rally site. A sizable portion of the Chavez rally rode "campaign" buses from other, states to attend, including distant states such as Delta Amaruco, Apure, and Bolivar. One report indicated that the Chavez campaign contracted 2,100 large buses for the event. The Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) dominated the red-clad crowd, but poloffs also observed smaller contingents from Patria Para Todos (PPT), Podemos, the Tupamaros, and the Communist Party (PCV). Many of those present carried banners from the government-sponsored social missions, the national oil company (PDVSA), and even some government ministries. Rally organizers plied the participants with ample distribution of free water and juice -- and cheap beer -- and amplified Chavez' message with a sophisticated array of speakers and video screens.

¶7. (SBU) An ebullient Chavez delivered a 140-minute speech asserting, yet again, that he is running against President Bush ("el diablo") and that only he can save Venezuela from again becoming an "American colony" (sic). Chavez promised to make Venezuela a "world power" to stand up to "American imperialism," and he bellowed "Gringo go home" in English several times. Chavez also warned his supporters that the United States government may try to sabotage the December 3 election by "technical means" to overcome National Electoral Council (CNE) computer firewalls or by disrupting the

country's electrical grid (sic). Reflecting on his previous electoral victories, Chavez predicted that he would secure the largest number of votes to date and over 60 percent of the vote.

¶8. (SBU) Chavez also tried hard to deflect opposition criticism. He praised Energy Minister Rafael Ramirez for exhorting PDVSA managers to work for Chavez' re-election, and urged all his followers to be "red, very red" ("rojo, rojito"). He defended his "for love" campaign slogan at length, asserting that opposition members are unable to understand the solidarity between Chavistas. He insisted that as a "slave to the people," a vote for Chavez was simply a vote for the Venezuelan people. In an apparent response to Rosales' spouse's suggestion that the divorced Chavez is unfit to govern because he has no family, Chavez incorporated his parents, children, and grandchildren, all of whom were on stage, into his remarks.

¶9. (SBU) Chavez also rejected -- in advance -- any opposition accusations of fraud and instead urged his supporters to be on the look-out for electoral tricks from the opposition. He urged the opposition to accept electoral defeat and not to become "cannon fodder" for the "oligarchy." He also called on his supporters not to just get out the vote, but also to be prepared to mobilize on the streets, if necessary. Chavez called his first eight years in office a "transition" period, and promised to launch the next phase of "Bolivarian revolution from 2007 to 2021. At the conclusion of his speech, Chavez, flanked by Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro, National Assembly President Cilia Flores, and campaign manager Francisco Ameliach, boarded a campaign truck and drove slowly through the large crowd gathered on Bolivar Avenue.

Comment

¶10. (C) Both the Chavez and Rosales campaigns mobilized their largest campaign crowds to date at the most critical time -- the weekend before the presidential election. Both marches qualify as among the largest political congregations in Venezuelan history. Both campaigns can justly trumpet their final Caracas rallies as major successes. The massive size of both rallies -- only 24 hours apart -- is also a vivid projection of the political polarization in Venezuela. At the end of over three months of campaigning, Chavez demonstrated that his electoral machine is as effective -- and pernicious -- as ever. Rosales demonstrated that he remains a serious contender for president who enjoys -- for

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now -- the full support of virtually all the opposition. As successful as both candidates have been in shoring up their bases over the last 90 days, they both appear to have been far less successful in attracting voters from the other side.

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